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ABSTRACT

For one instructor, her work in autobiography began with an interest in understanding how her past has influenced her present work of teaching. Autobiography is an interpretive act and both a reunion and a release from the past. While there is commitment to truth in writing an autobiographical text, the autobiographer necessarily engages in the creative endeavor of constructing a story, involving both memory and invention. Specific details are literal truths that help in remembering, and scenes can be written in order to contrast feelings and experiences. Memory and imagination work hand in hand to forge an interpretive connection between past and present that has a more compelling claim to accuracy than mere fact. In pursuing the complicated truth, the autobiographer works with elements of craft that engage writers across a range of genres: the ability to select telling details, develop a sense of place, frame a moment in a scene, and construct a design or order out of those moments. These elements allow both the reader and the writer to occupy the world of the writer's life and the world of the text. (CR)

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When Memory Fails and Invention Takes Over: The Role of Fiction in Autobiographical Writing

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My work in autobiography began with an interest in understanding how my past influences my present day work teaching. I was specifically interested in two questions. First, I wondered how my life experiences impact on the teacher I am today? I was influenced by the philosopher Paul Brockelmen and his idea that personal identity is comprised of a series of selves — me at twelve, at twenty, at thirty-five. Who <u>was</u> the "me at 12" and how might that person be operable in my teaching today? How might these earlier selves come into play in my current work? Second I questioned: what does it mean to <u>construct</u> the story of your life? I saw autobiography as an interpretive act. If autobiography is, as bell hooks writes, "both a reunion and a release from the past," then the writer of an autobiography is positioned to take a hand in shaping her future. In teaching, where learning from experience is critical, autobiography's potential to heighten one's awareness of oneself as a learner and teacher seemed particularly valuable.

At the same time my interest in writing this autobiography was bigger than the impact the writing might have on me; I wanted

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to craft a text that had the potential to impact readers. And it was here that I seemed to be starting at a disadvantage.

My autobiography would differ from most autobiographies in which the notoriety of the author attracts and holds the reader's interest. In my "ordinary story" there would be no drawing factor for the reader, no natural curiosity to keep them reading. It was up to the text itself to carry the reader forward. My emphasis, then, was on constructing a well-written text that would engage a reader by the merit of its literary quality while staying within the confines of the genre of autobiography. As I saw it, the main confine is the primary contract the writer has with the reader that that the story the writer is delivering is a true one.

During the time I was writing I ran into an friend in the post office. After listening to me talk about my work she commented, "I could never write an autobiography. I hardly remember anything from my past." Though her comment made logical sense, it reveals an assumption many people hold that autobiography is simply a matter of pulling back the curtain of time, finding an intact life and recording what happened. And while there is this commitment to truth in writing an autobiographical text, the autobiographer necessarily engages in the creative endeavor of constructing a story. This endeavor involves both memory and invention.

I want to suggest that "invention," rather than jeopardizing accuracy, is the very means one uses to arrive at autobiographical truth. In order to illustrate that, let me demonstrate the interplay between memory and invention as it unfolded in my work.

When you write about the past you are creating a world in order to revisit it. You are, in a sense, making it up. But you make it up out of the real stuff of life. In this case, I used the remembered objects of the past to re-create my experiences in elementary school.

> What did I learn to love about school? The alliances formed between rows of desks. Finding the sweaty palm of David Coullaird in a square dance during a third grade gym period. Descending the granite steps ten minutes before the school bell rang wearing my white safety patrol belt—the quiet of the playground speaking a language itself. Having my very own bean sprouting in a box on the sunny windowsill in my second grade classroom. The long rays of sun cocooning me in warmth while Miss Donahue's voice washes over the class. School objects—the new crayons I kept in my desk. Neat stacks of paper. Square pink erasers. Moistened powder paint in jars. The smell of a fresh mimeograph and the cool on my check when I held the moist sheet to my face. I loved my space at school—the two feet of desk that belonged to me.
>
> (Portalupi, 1995)

These specific details are my tools; I lay them out, brick by brick, in order to construct the two story square box of a building that was my elementary school. Once constructed I can re-enter this space from my past, re-experience it, and bring to life the child living in the ten-foot ceilinged classrooms day after day her first five years of schooling. But my "child-self" is not the only person present in the world I have created on the page. It is not this historical self (the 6, 7, 8, or 9 year old child) who writes: *I loved my space at school—the two feet of desk that belonged to me.* That discovery belongs to the author — what Franzosa (1992) calls the authorial self—the person I am today standing in the present looking back. The specific details are literal truths that help me remember.

There were beans sprouting on the windowsills and damp mimeograph sheets. These literal truths lead me to uncover the surprising conceptual truth that as a nine year old I had very little autonomy or control over what took place in school.

What does an autobiographer do with a conceptual truth like that? When I wrote the line — *how I loved my space at school, the two feet of desk that belonged to me*— I was taken aback. I used this surprising discovery to continue to read my life. I returned to other places of my childhood with the discovery fresh in hand. I thought about my life as a child at play, in the neighborhood during those long summer days. I asked myself: what kind of autonomy did I have then? I became intrigued by the difference.

I grew up in a small town in Northern Vermont where we were out in the streets from the moment the sun came up exploring in the woods or building forts. And nobody bothered us all day. One year my mother had a whistle, another year it was a bell: different ways of calling us back at dinner time. I was interested in the tension between the two worlds of school and home.

This eventually led me to write this scene in order to contrast the autonomy I felt as a child at play in the neighborhood with the child I had discovered in the school house.

> I check the ripeness of the blackberries behind my house and estimate a few more days. There is time to anticipate the event. So many things to do with fresh blackberries. I toy with the options but know in the end it will be the same as always. I will pull on long pants, grab a plastic container from under the sink, and make the trip up the hill before breakfast. I will reach into the briars, avoiding the dew-scribed webs, to pluck, cool, plump berries until I have a bowlful. Later, I'll eat them

> straight: a mound of berries, a sprinkling of sugar, in a poll of milk. I'll eat them on the front steps before any neighbor is up, before Denise or Mary or Scott, and I'll plan the day. Not a list of things I must do, but the myriad of things I might possible choose. It will be like every morning, with the promise of an open day before it. And it will be like none other, unique of its own accord, an empty page whose only certainty is that a story will find its way there.
>
> (Portalupi, 1995)

It wasn't until long after I wrote this, perhaps even after I saw it in print in *Language Arts* that I realized *this scene had never actually happened* . Patricia Hampl writes: "The imprecision of memory causes us to create, to extend remembrance into narrative. It sometimes seems, therefore, that what we remember is not — could not be — true. And yet it is accurate. "

Autobiographical truth is complicated. Because we are story making creatures, we are drawn to create scenes that fit the narrative lives we are in the midst of living. This scene was drawn out of the material of my life; if not the actual experiences, then the lived felt-experiences of that life. It captures the essence of the child; and the lived emotions of that childhood. Memory and the imagination work hand in hand to forge an "interpretive connection between past and present that has a more compelling claim to accuracy than mere fact (Franzosa, 402)." Still I have to deal with the fact that this particular scene never actually happened. I have written a lie. And so I'm interested; If the scene never actually occurred; what purpose does it serve in appearing on the page?

I might pursue two lines of thinking in answering this question. On the one hand the text demanded I write this scene. A story needs unity and this scene was necessary in developing the cohesion a

reader needs. In writing it, I was being attentive to my readers. It is interesting to consider the way in which the presence of readers offers a liability to the autobiographer's contract to remain accurate. But something else is going on as well. Not only did the scene never happened, it never would have happened. The function of memory often leads us to write fictions that serve as screens to other memories less palatable. This scene was concealing a child I didn't want to remember. As an autobiographer I learned to be on the look-out for such "untruths" and to recognize their importance. I learned to see my lies and say, "ah ha, here's something to work with" in the same way Hampl has commented on her writing of memoir.

> "Now that I have the fragment down on paper, I can read this little piece as a mystery which drops clues to the riddle of my feelings, like a culprit who wishes to be apprehended. My narrative self (the culprit who has invented) wishes to be discovered by my reflective self, the self who wants to understand and make sense of a half-remembered story about a nun sneezing in the sun.... (pg. 99) "

Like Hampl's, my story is half-remembered; the other is half created. Like Hampl my reflective self wants to understand and make sense of this invented child sitting confidently on her front steps. When I pushed the screen aside and looked further I ended up with this:

> Who is this child? Surely I do not know. I remember a child too timid to enter the woods alone. Yet the scene works: a simple shaping of facts to create the unity the story needed. The child I create comes alive through these actions and the intentions they imply. And yet, I remember less this child and more the child as fertile ground in which my mother planted

> countless seeds of fear. Fear of strangers, fear of rivers, fear of getting lost in the words. In an attempt to make the world a safe place, my mother scarred the world with warnings of anything (and consequently this means everything) in which danger may prevail. This child would not have eaten a mound of dew-moist berries in the early morning hours of my neighborhood. More likely I would have waited to wake Denise cajoling her to come with me, or maybe taken my younger sister, Mary. Maybe I'd have gone up the hill alone, but it would have been later in the day once people were stirring. This I have done; but I can not relax nor lose myself in the moment. My ears are sentry for unfamiliar sounds. I inevitably leave quicker, pick less than I would on another day. Once I make the decision to turn and come down the hill I can not hold back. I break into a run and let the weight of my body pull me faster down the hill. I come within sight of the house and suddenly feel lighter, more playful, more safe.

Autobiographical truth is complicated, rarely lying within a single story. We need both our stories and their counter stories. Truth pools in the intersections of the multiple, often conflicting stories we find ourselves compelled to write. In this case, one world is real, another world imagined. I could not have found the child that I did without first creating the other one. This marriage between memory and imagination is what the autobiographer has to work with: neither stands alone.

In pursuing this complicated "truth" the autobiographer works with elements of craft that engage writers across a range of genres: the ability to select telling details, develop a sense of place, frame a moment in a scene, and construct a design or order out of those moments. These elements allow both the reader and the writer to occupy the world of the writer's life and the world of the text. An autobiographer may begin by pulling back the curtain on a life, but it

isn't until she is done inventing that she steps into that life behind the curtain.

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